

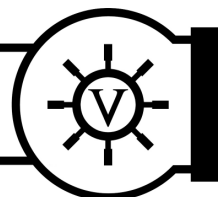
Fugue State

horizon

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PONY FICTION VAULT



"What's wrong, honey?" Bon Bon asked, already knowing the answer.

Lyra's head whipped from side to side, eyes darting about. She backed away from the table.

"The *music*," she hissed.

Bon Bon gestured to the half-eaten bowl of fresh-roasted cashews, hoping her smile didn't look as brittle as it felt. "Honey. Please. It's nothing. Finish your breakfast."

Lyra's eyes shot open. "*Nothing?*" She trotted around the table and thrust forward a hoof. "Sweetie... let's go."

Bon Bon set down her bowl of oatmeal, but didn't stand. "You're overreacting. I'm sure it's just Pinkie Pie again. You know how she gets." She drew in a breath and hummed a wavering melody—gratingly dissonant against the distant swelling strains of orchestration. "Hmm, hmmm hmmm, smile, smile, smile." The music was making it hard to focus. She struggled for words, raised her voice to drown out the new tune: "Fill my heart up with sunshine, sunshine—"

A hoof slammed onto the table with the rattling finality of a cymbal crash. "No. We're *going*, Bonnie. I almost lost you at the wedding. I can't let that—"

"The *song*," Bon Bon said, "wasn't the problem. The songs are the *happy* times. We'll be fine."

Lyra gritted her teeth and raised her hoof to her right ear, brushing her mane back. "Don't do this to me. Not now. We can argue when you're safe."

Bon Bon recognized the gesture—it usually accompanied an exasperated "Bonnie" or "be reasonable"—but held her ground, ears flattening. "Don't do this to *me*," she said softly. "Honey, I like the songs."

A fanfare sounded somewhere down the block. Lyra froze, nostrils flaring in short breaths. Her eyes darted sideways, then fixed on Bon Bon in a wordless plea. Bon Bon sat in silence, returning the same stare. Lyra brushed her mane back again. Bon Bon frowned.

Lyra exhaled through clenched teeth. “Be reasonable. They’re dangerous. Don’t tell me the songs aren’t dangerous. You sprained your ankle chasing after Twilight Sparkle’s gala tickets.”

“That was an accident. What about when those nice unicorn brothers came to town? We all sang, and then we got cider.”

“I would have choked on a leaf in those hucksters’ swill if Nurse Redheart hadn’t known the Haylick Maneuver. We need to *go*, sweetie. *Now*.”

Bon Bon winced. She’d forgotten that part. “Winter Wrap-Up,” she said, trying to ignore the slow crescendo of the music. “Everypony had fun at Winter Wrap-Up. *Please*, honey, sit down, we’ll be *fine*.”

“Yes, and everyone was enjoying the Grand Galloping Gala until they almost *collapsed the palace on us*. Sweetie—” Lyra glanced down the street, and the rest of her sentence was lost in a strangled cry. She hooked an ankle around Bon Bon’s shoulder and yanked. Bon Bon shrieked as she lost her balance. Lyra wrapped her forehooves around Bon Bon’s flailing form, hauling her into the nearby alleyway.

Violins swelled. Trumpets blared. Twilight Sparkle leaped onto a fountain in the square outside the restaurant.

“*There’s a mayor, en route to her office!*” Twilight sang. Her eyes glinted in the sunlight. Birds soared and swept around her. The air itself seemed to shimmer—vibrant, alive.

Lyra looked over her shoulder, horror growing on her muzzle. Bon Bon stared, transfixed.

“*There’s the sofa clerk, selling some quills!*”

“Morning, kid!” Mr. Quill called out in perfect time to the lively beat of the *pizzicato* strings. Lyra’s rear hoof began tapping to the rhythm.

Bon Bon felt her face flush, her heart beat in time to the music. Twilight was so *happy!* A smile spread across her muzzle as she squirmed from Lyra’s embrace and scrambled to her hooves. She and Lyra could... could join... and. She blinked. Why had Lyra dragged her to the alleyway? Lyra was... *en route to her office!* No—

“*My Ponyville is so gentle and still!*”

The corners of Lyra's mouth curled up into a pure, joyous smile. Her eyes widened. She slapped herself harshly across the muzzle, threw herself against the side of the building, and clapped her hooves over her ears, whispering "No, no, no, no..."

Bon Bon, about to rush out into the square despite some nagging feeling in the back of her brain, hesitated. What was *wrong* with Lyra?

"Can things ever go wrong? I don't think that they will!"

Bon Bon heard a thump around the corner as Twilight leapt up onto one of the restaurant's tables. Then laughter, squeals, tap-dancing. Again! Another pony on the tables! She was *missing out*—but something was wrong with Lyra—no, how could it be? Everything was *certainly fine*. All it lacked was her. She took a step forward toward her rightful place in the universe—

Aquamarine hooves clamped around her and dragged her back into the alley.

"Morning in Ponyville shimmers! Morning in Ponyville shines!"

Bon Bon's head throbbed with the dissonance of separation from the beat. "Lyra!" she whined. "What are you—let me go—stop that—"

"Ssh!"

"And I know for absolute certain!"

"Let me go *this instant* or I swear I will—"

"That everything is certainly—"

There was a loud splash. The spell snapped like a strained rubber band.

Their bodies jerked. Bon Bon overbalanced and fell to the ground. Lyra staggered and doubled over, coughing, face red.

Thunder rumbled and rolled. Rain fell on the bridge by the river. Snow fell on the restaurant's patio.

Lyra and Bon Bon picked themselves up and looked at each other. The words of the song flooded back into memory, punctuated by the shriek of a distant unicorn dodging a lightning bolt.

Bon Bon sighed, ears drooping. “Leaving?”

“Leaving.”

• • •

The bedroom: two small suitcases on separate beds. Bon Bon’s bag was floral, faded, lumpy. Four days’ worth of wadded-up dresses and saddlebags; a small but bulging coin purse; a framed photo of them sitting on a park bench; a family heirloom taffy jar she couldn’t bear to leave behind; her smallest jewelry box, wedged in next to the jar. Lyra’s was a model of geometric efficiency. Clothing and accessories folded into tight squares and stacked in three neat rows, marred only by the mothballs Bon Bon had added a few months ago without asking. Pencils, quills, notebooks, scrolls. Pages of notes in precise hornwriting—bank accounts, family members’ contact information, the name and address of their hotel. Her second-nicest lyre, all the way at the back, wrapped in fabric and tape. A binocular-shaped gap.

The balcony: The aquamarine back of an unmoving unicorn, crouching at the railing and staring at the horizon through those binoculars.

The border between them: Bon Bon.

“Hmmm hm hm-de-hm-hm,” she hummed. “Smile, smile, smile.” It just didn’t seem the same *a capella*. “There’s one thing that makes me happy, and makes my whole life worthwhile—”

“Don’t.”

Bon Bon stopped, then retreated to the bedroom. It was silent and swathed in shadow.

She stared at the bags forlornly. She had just about made up her mind to walk back out to the balcony when the blue-green phantom shifted. Its head swiveled to the side. Its horn lit, lifting a pencil and pad. The pencil swooped, scritch, through several terse lines and dots. The pencil and pad lowered to the ground, and the figure returned to its observations.

Bon Bon swallowed, throat dry. She went out anyway.

They were stories, stories, *hundreds* of stories above Manehattan, the top floor of the hotel, a west-facing room. The hills and plains stretched out toward Ponyville, a dot on the horizon: some liminal zone between the sky’s pale blue and the land’s fertile green,

between Everfree's sickly darkness and Canterlot's barren grey. A cold wind swept around them—some artifact of the local weather team's carelessness, or some omen from the silent distance. The sun hung high in the heavens.

"Honey," she said, "come inside. Please."

"That's three," Lyra said through a raspy throat.

"Things will work themselves out. We'll write Carrot Top a letter. She'll let us know. You don't have to watch."

"*Three. We've never seen a three-singer before. I'm not sure we're far enough away.*"

Bon Bon opened and closed her mouth. "Honey, when's the last time you ate?"

Lyra looked back, blinking, focus broken by the question. Her eyes were sunken, dark. Near the base of her right ear, her mane was tangled and matted.

"Lunch," she finally said.

"The leftovers of my watercress sandwich?"

"Yeah."

"That was yesterday."

"Oh."

Bon Bon sighed. "Please, honey. Take a break. Walk with me. There's a nice-looking Qilinese place down the block."

Lyra carefully set the binoculars down on the balcony floor and turned around, brushing a hoof past her ear. "Hundreds of acres of farmland rotted in less than the time our train took to get here. The newspaper said this morning that stores were closing in Ponyville Square due to bankruptcies. And something about riots. The weather hasn't been stable *once* since Twilight's little stunt Tuesday. That's our *home*, sweetie. I want to know if there's going to be anything there to return to once this is all over."

"If it's our home," Bon Bon said without thinking, "then we should *be there with them.*"

Lyra winced, ears flattening.

Guilt twinged at Bon Bon's heart, but somewhere on its path toward apology, a thought ambushed it, fierce, defiant: *Three songs, if we'd stayed.*

Lyra looked back away. "I'm sorry. We'll go back the instant it's safe, okay?"

"Is it really home if we're only there when it's safe?"

"I don't care about home. I care about *you*."

Three songs.

"Do you care about me being happy?" Bon Bon asked.

"I do. But I can't lose you."

"You won't."

"No. Don't. You can't promise me that."

Bon Bon stopped, jaw straying open. *Is it really love, her mind echoed, if we're only there when it's safe?*

"I'm sorry," she said. "You're right. I can't. I never could."

Lyra nodded, turned back to the horizon, and settled back in at the railing.

"Lyra," Bon Bon said. "I'm leaving."

"Bring back lunch," Lyra said. "You're right. I should at least eat."

There was a long silence.

"Are they singing out there?" Bon Bon asked.

Lyra leaned forward, squinting through the lenses. "Yeah. I think. Same song though. Not four. Not yet."

No response.

"You said Qilinese, right? Do they have *suàn pú gōng yīng*?"

A distant door creaked and slammed.

Lyra set down the binoculars and turned around. “Bonnie?”

The bedroom: one precisely-packed suitcase.

Op. 5, Mv. 2: "Development"

The train station was the noisy kind of silent. The murmur of distant traffic and passing conversations, the cough of a busker taking a break from his playing, the hiss of steam and the squeak of wheels on rail: they were all sound, but they weren't *song*. Each ruled its own corner of the station, tapped out its own beat. In the middle, where they all clashed: a poorly-packed, curly-haired earth pony.

"Hmm, hmmm hmm," she began, but the loud and hungry silence devoured the tune. She faltered. Pinkie Pie was a long way away.

Cheeks flushing, Bon Bon approached the busker. The bespectacled earth pony, freckled grey with a shaggy dun-red mane, looked up from tuning his fiddle.

"Can you..." she started.

Three songs.

Ponyville was a long way away. So was Lyra. The silence felt like it was going to rip her apart.

She steadied herself. "Can you... play me a musical number?"

He smiled. "I know a few, I do. Trotters and Canterstein? Irving Marelin?"

Her blush deepened. "No, I meant... you know. Start one."

His look seemed more bemused than anything. "I'm just a musician, miss. That's *magic*, it is."

"I know. You're not even a unicorn, but I figured... well, she's an earth pony, and if Pinkie Pie can do it ..." The thought sounded crazy as it left her mouth. Pinkie Pie was all *sorts* of crazy.

His stare lingered for a moment. "You've got interesting friends, miss," he said, turning his attention back to his fiddle.

Bon Bon looked back at the high-rise hotel, and out at the grey and grimy buildings in the vague direction of Ponyville. "I suppose I do."

“*Big* magic, it is. Have you ever actually been in a musical, miss?” He tapped his head. “It gets right into your brain, and never leaves you the same. We’re pebbles on a rocky slope, we are, and a musical’s an avalanche.”

She wasn’t listening. Her cheeks were burning hot. She couldn’t take it. Her music was so far away.

Bon Bon set down her bag and opened it, dropping the coin purse on the ground with a heavy *clink*. “All my bits,” she whispered, glancing around the empty platform, “if you can start a musical.”

His eyes went wide. “Ah. Well... ah. I’ll do what I can, miss, I will. Have you got a destiny?”

No, Bon Bon thought. *That’s why I want to feel one.*

“Won’t know unless we try, will we, ha-ha,” she said with a feeble smile.

He chuckled. “That’s the spirit.” His face grew serious as he set the fiddle to his chin. “I’ll be guessing, in an empty train station with tear-stained cheeks, that destiny’s been going through some troubles?”

Bon Bon nodded, looking away.

The busker touched his bow to the fiddle, scraped, increased the pressure until the two high strings sang in harmony, re-angled, and drew out a long, low note that entwined with the atonal rumble of the rails. “I’ll fiddle a song from the Old Country. You’ve probably heard the tune as ‘O Donny Colt’, but it goes much further back, it does. It’s as powerful a song I can play while still being familiar enough to sing to.”

She blinked. “Sing?”

He raised an eyebrow. “You wanted a musical, you did.”

The shame of singing to an empty train platform warred with the shame of admitting that she had wanted *someone else’s* musical number, something to lose herself in. Bon Bon swallowed. “I did.”

He nodded. The bow kissed the strings. Their melody sang out, a clear and sweet fire that made the noise of the station melt away. Bon Bon closed her eyes, feeling her chest tighten at the ballad’s wordless loss and longing.

The tune hesitated for a moment. She glanced down at the busker, who was staring back expectantly. When their eyes met, the music pressed into a second verse.

Bon Bon cleared her throat.

"I'm all alone."

It was a start. Her voice wavered, almost cracking. The words were self-evident—trite and cheap against the power of the music. But it was a start.

"How did it come to this?"

The question drew to a close a syllable short of the line. *"Now,"* she added as the music hung accusingly unresolved. She winced. The correction just made it worse. She had to go back and fix it—but there it was, and the song was already moving on; she couldn't take back a word said in haste—

"I'm all alone," she blurted out, cramming the syllables in to catch back up with the rhythm.

This wasn't working. Panic tugged at the edge of her consciousness. All she wanted was her music back—no. *Someone else's* music back. This was her, Bon Bon, in sharp relief: alone and failing. So much simpler to be a background chorus to other ponies' lives.

"Where did my Lyra go?"

The line slid out with terrifying ease. The question didn't. *Bon Bon* was the one that had left, for a train back toward Ponyville and its danger and chaos—but she wouldn't even be here if Lyra hadn't dragged her away, and—oh, cripes, another verse—

*"She couldn't sing
The tune my heart sang. Lonely."*

She'd done it again—thrown in extra syllables to finish the line. Even worse, "lonely heart sang" would have been a beautiful fit. Why couldn't she have gotten it right? Lyra would have—

—and the next line was upon her, and her mind was blank—

"I-I can't do this," Bon Bon said, raising her voice to break the music. She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I—"

“Keep at it,” the busker said. “You’re doing as well as anypony I’ve ever seen, finding words in the moment.” His fiddling hadn’t paused, though their conversation was trampling all over the melody. “You’re being honest, you are. Even if it’s rough—” He stopped as the fiddle keened out the end of a line, and replayed the part at which Bon Bon had balked:

“Your heart must sing to heal, this I know.”

His singing voice was the asphalt of a Manhattan street, dark and smooth and rough at the edges. Bon Bon stared at him, transfixed for a moment, until the silliness of the rhyme caught up with her. A giggle escaped. Maybe she *was* doing alright, if the *professional* swooping in to save her couldn’t come up with anything better.

He gave her a wink and a smile, and the music soared up the scales into the next verse. She took a breath.

*“I face a choice,
Between lo-ove and happiness.”*

She’d hit the stressed syllable too early. More stupid amateur mistakes. But... he was right. When she let her heart sing, the mistakes didn’t feel so bad. To hear the words out in the open air, lifted and buoyed by the music despite their wretched rhythm... there was something pure about it. Something like singing along with Pinkie Pie—except that this was *Bon Bon’s* song.

*“Will I turn my back
On my joy or her fear?”*

This was *her* song! Extra syllables and all! Her heart sped up to the music. She was doing it! Really doing it!

“Are my songs woo-ooorth,”

Bon Bon’s voice cracked on the high note, and she dropped down an octave. She didn’t care. She was swept up.

“The end of all the life we built?”

The busker stretched the note out, letting the penultimate line linger unresolved, tense but not harsh. Bon Bon drew in a shaky breath. He sniffled.

“Without even a goodbye—”

“Bon Bon,” a strong and melodic voice spoke, “I’m here.”

She turned, her breath catching.

There was Lyra, shivering at the edge of the train platform, one hoof extended. A gust of wind caught her mane from behind and blew it into a halo around her quivering muzzle.

Invisible violins burst into a crescendo. Ponies appeared out of nowhere, mouths open in song—around corners, up the stairs from the street, walking into view on the far platform—and as they approached, their choir swelled. A pegasus mare flew down from above with a saxophone, joining the busker’s lonely melody for a sweet and soulful duet. He fiddled with renewed energy, a beatific smile on his muzzle, tears streaking down his cheeks.

Bon Bon’s eyes blurred. She felt her own tears stream down her face. She trotted, light-headed, toward the indistinct blue-green figure.

If being drawn into a musical was irresistible, being at its center was *intoxicating*. The music surged through her, burned in her veins. The whole world was beating to the rhythm of her heart. Thoughts flashed like a summer thunderstorm through her brain—a jumble of words, images, melodies, harmonies, each one a tamed lightning bolt waiting to be plucked and thrown.

The storm sizzled, pounded, receded—leaving a perfect clarity in its wake, a view to the infinite horizon. *We’ve never had a destiny before*, she thought. The violins molded their tune to the cadence of the line, urging the choir to peak and crest, drawing the instruments down to a low and repetitive background hum in preparation for the verse. More lightning flashed and crackled in the back of her mind. *Always thwarted by love’s storm. However, now we see the distant shore. A port with beaches safe and warm.*

Was that the spell? She wasn’t a poet. She could never have come up with something so effortlessly vivid, with such crisp scansion and complex internal rhymes... wait. *Scansion?* She didn’t even *talk* like that!

Some other part of her brain overruled her objections. Celestia help her, she didn’t *care*. This was the perfect, shining moment she’d always been looking for.

The choir let out one final *aaah*, then leaned forward, hushed. Bon Bon took a breath, and reached out for Lyra’s hooves.

“*We’ve never had a destiny before,*” she sang, effortlessly on pitch. The clear and fluid voice felt like somepony else’s.

“No,” Lyra whispered. Then the whispers grew urgent: “No no. *No.*”

“*Always...*” Bon Bon faltered. She blinked several times to clear her eyes. Lyra was sweating, shaking, staring open-mouthed.

“*Always,*” she repeated. The music seamlessly stretched out the line by an extra beat to cover her. “*Thwarted by—*”

Lyra screamed.

Bon Bon jerked her hooves back. The music slammed to a halt. Her body spasmed, and an almost visible wave of energy surged out from her. The gathered ponies staggered away.

Lyra dropped straight to the ground, like a marionette with her strings cut, and then bent double, retching. A few drops of thin saliva spattered onto the railway platform. She curled into a tight ball, eyes squeezed shut, and sobbed.

“Oh no,” Bon Bon whispered. She crouched over Lyra’s form, desperately reaching a hoof out, stopping short of touching her. “Honey. Oh, no, no no. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

A circle of murmuring ponies closed back in, illuminated dimly, as if the sun shone for the pair alone. Lyra gasped and sobbed, fighting for words. “Tried. Sorry. Thought I could...”

“Ssh.” Bon Bon beat back her fear and lunged forward to give Lyra a tight hug. “Oh, honey. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Ruined your song.” A bitter laugh, then a hiccup. “Your first.”

“I don’t care,” Bon Bon lied. Losing the song hurt, but it wasn’t as bad as watching the pain she’d caused. She kissed Lyra’s wet cheek. “*Our* song.”

“What?”

“It started when you came. You’re the musician. You’re the unicorn.”

“But you made it. *You.* That’s huge. You should be proud.”

Bon Bon smiled. “Thank you,” she whispered, holding Lyra and stroking her mane.

Lyra shifted, bringing a hoof to Bon Bon’s withers, then slumped back to the ground. “You should go.”

Bon Bon’s smile vanished as if slapped. “What? I... I’m not going to do that.”

“You already did. And you were right.” Lyra’s mouth smiled; her eyes were dull. “I already lost you, didn’t I? But if I can’t make you happy, I’d rather see you happy.”

“Lyra, please.” Bon Bon tamped down her sudden fear. “The happiest moment of my life was when I turned around and saw you.”

Awww, the crowd breathed. Bon Bon blushed. It was a treacly sentiment, but sincere.

Lyra looked away. “It shouldn’t have been. I was terrified. I broke your musical number.”

“But you came back for me. That’s what matters.”

Lyra didn’t respond. A murmur rippled through the crowd.

“You, um, *did* come back for me,” Bon Bon said, “right?”

Lyra stared up into the sky. When she spoke, her voice was faint. “When you left, the only thing I could think was, *she’s going back to Ponyville*. I had to stop you. Not stop you from leaving—just stop you from going back. Then I got here, and you were singing.” She shook her head. “After that? I don’t know. You know how it is when the music starts. What’s in your head *isn’t you*.” Lyra closed her eyes and shivered. “There’s... there’s something in my mind that says I want you back more than anything. But it’s like poking at a loose tooth. It’s in the wrong place and hurts a little and *I don’t even know if it’s me or not*. How can it be love if it’s not me?”

Bon Bon opened her mouth to respond, but an unfamiliar stallion’s voice cut in: “Course it’s you. It’s *destiny*.”

She looked around for its source. The crowd’s murmurs rose, like water behind a dam, then spilled. A pudgy, older mare wearing Manehattan finery and oversized earrings stepped forward, leveling a hoof at Lyra. “Shame on you. This lovely filly feels strongly enough about you to start a musical number, and in response you sit there toying with her feelings?” She turned to Bon Bon. “Sweetie, she doesn’t *deserve* you.”

Lyra looked up, surprised. Bon Bon, equally surprised, spoke first. “But she—”

“Every musical has a happy ending,” huffed another mare, a younger unicorn with a frown on her muzzle and a book on her flank. “How could she deny you yours?”

Bon Bon took a step back toward Lyra. “Please—”

“Yeah, that was selfish!” a rough-jawed cabbie said, closing in. “That woulda been your first musical. That woulda been *my* first musical!”

The dam broke. A wave of ponies surged forward. “Mine too!” “I thought something was going to happen here!” “Yeah, selfish.” “If she can’t handle destiny, don’t give it to her!” “Sick in the head.” The voices raised and fought as the circle shrank. “Some musician.” “—ungrateful little—” “Break up!” “—take care of her—”

“STOP!” Bon Bon shouted.

The crowd hesitated.

“Stop it,” she said, sheltering Lyra with her body. “I love her. That’s all that matters. Please... stop.”

The invisible violins swelled up into a sweet and sad reprise, a wordless tune that spurred everypony into action. They backed up, embarrassed, then shuffled away—into the train, down the station stairs, around corners. Soon, the platform was empty except for Lyra, Bon Bon, and the busker. The strings trailed off, and the sounds of the city crept back in around the three silent ponies.

Lyra struggled to her hooves. “Thank you,” she said faintly.

Bon Bon let out a shaky breath. Her body sagged. She glanced around, walked to her luggage, picked up her purse in her mouth, set it in front of the busker without meeting his eyes, and turned to Lyra. “I’m so tired. Let’s go home.”

Lyra’s eyes widened—whether in guilt or fear, Bon Bon couldn’t tell. “But... the musicals.”

“*Home.*”

Lyra bit her lip and looked away.

After a few moments, Bon Bon sighed. “I’ll see you. I hope. Maybe. Sometime.” She turned around, trudged to the train, passed the conductor her ticket, and disappeared into the passenger car.

Lyra sat down on the platform and stared at the train, her emotions writhing and whirling just out of reach. She felt like she ought to be crying, but the tears wouldn’t come.

She heard a quiet *clink* from her side, and looked over. The busker had nudged the bag of bits, and was staring at it as if his hoof had come back bloody. He glanced back at her motion. Their eyes met for a moment. He set down his fiddle, walked over, and sat at Lyra’s side.

“I’m sorry,” she said. It felt like the thing to say.

“Can I share a story?” he asked, voice subdued.

“Huh? Oh... sure, I guess.”

The busker pushed his glasses up on his nose. “The stallion who taught me to play—his name’s Tall Tale, it is, so take this with a grain of salt—told me once about a musical number he fiddled for Gnat-King Foal himself. It was in a dark, lonely street, after one of King’s concerts in Las Pegasus. King sang about how his daughter Gnatalee wanted to start touring as a singer. He knew the places where that road led, he did, and he couldn’t let her use her college fund to follow in his hoofsteps.

“When the song ended, King got a funny look on his muzzle, he did. He turned to Tall Tale, and he asked, ‘I’m going to break her heart, aren’t I? Back home, she’s dreaming about life out on the wing, and now destiny’s telling me to stand in the way.’

“Tall shook his head. ‘Never ya mind destiny, King,’ he said. ‘What ya sang... is it the right thing to do?’”

The busker smiled. “He said when King got back to Manehattan—”

“All aboard!” the conductor called.

The busker glanced up, startled, then stared into Lyra’s eyes. She found herself pinned by their sudden intensity. “I’ll cut right to the point, miss. If you’re going to ask yourself about the love in your head, ask the right question. You don’t know if it’s yours. Do you *want* it to be?”

She stared back, paralyzed, feeling a tear work its way loose.

“Miss,” he begged, “hurry. *Please.*”

With a burst of steam and the hiss of hydraulic brakes, the train began to move.

And there she was—back in all her glory, balloons on her flank, hair poofed out:

“Come on, ponies, I wanna see you smile!”

“**PINKIE!**” the crowd roared with Bon Bon—echoing around the square, swaying signs, rattling windows. Even the music was drowned out for a moment, long enough for a stray thought to flit through Bon Bon’s mind: *I bet they heard that all the way in Manehattan.*

But then the snares kicked back in, and the chorus swept them away, grinning maniacally, surging down the streets behind the Elements of Harmony:

A true, true friend helps a friend in need!

A friend will be there to help them see!

Trumpets blared. Lines of singers marched in perfect time. Ponies sang from balconies and somersaulted over each other at the edges of the crowd. Bon Bon, not quite quick enough for the front-row spot she’d enjoyed at Pinkie’s return, fell in at the back of the crowd between Carrot Top and an unfamiliar sky-blue mare with a grey mane.

A true, true friend helps a friend in need!

Galloping to the beat of the impromptu parade’s giant bass drum, Bon Bon leapt, and some power beyond muscles propelled her skyward, breaking the bonds of earth, bringing her to an impossible touchdown on a second-story rooftop. Far below, Twilight’s closest friends hoisted her to the top of a pony pyramid, and she burst out into magical illumination that bathed Ponyville, matching the sun in the newly cleared sky.

To see the light!

“*To see the light!*” Bon Bon echoed, in perfect unity with the dozens of earth ponies and pegasi of the rooftop chorus.

That shines!

“*That shines!*” she sang, heart soaring, as she raised a forehoof with the others.

From a true, true friend!

The final note soared and held amid the pink glow of the Elements' group hug. Laughing, dancing, embracing, Ponyville rejoiced in its rejuvenation. Then the drums beat out a coda, and the spell wound to a close.

Heart still hammering to the beat, filled with the best kind of exhaustion, Bon Bon let herself sink into gravity's embrace. She felt a moment of vertigo, then remembered that *she was on the peak of a rooftop* as she overbalanced, legs windmilling, about to bounce down a steep incline and then two stories to the ground—

There was a hard jerk on her tail, and she fell onto her stomach on the soft straw, held in place until she got her hooves underneath her. She looked back. It was Carrot Top, lying flat against the opposite slope of the roof, Bon Bon's pink-and-purple tail in her muzzle. She let go, spat out some stray hairs, and gave Bon Bon an apologetic grin.

Bon Bon laughed. Not because it was funny, but because it was so *perfect*. Here she was, about to get hurt by a musical in the most ridiculous way possible, and a *true, true friend* had kept her safe—

Just like Lyra always had.

The soaring joy from the musical came crashing down in the instant between breaths. Her body bucked and curled, and the laughs became hysterical, helpless sobs.

Lyra was gone. Bon Bon had given her an ultimatum and walked away. What madness had *possessed* her?

"Bon Bon?" Carrot Top asked.

She couldn't respond. Sobs hammered her body like a drum, to a frantic tempo—*Lyra's gone, Lyra's gone, Lyra's gone*. She felt herself losing control of her muscles—head getting light—

"*Bon Bon!*" Hooves roughly shook her, then clung to her. She was dimly aware of straw sliding underneath her. "Help! Somepony—"

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The world around her was a gauzy, detached blur. Carrot Top's terrified face; the rooftop sliding and then lurching to a stop; the hooves of pegasi; beating wings; a slow descent into Town Square. The gentle embrace of the earth. Carrot Top's face again. Bon Bon blinked, and focused on the orange muzzle. The haze retreated.

“Bonnie!” Carrot Top said. “Thank the stars. What happened?”

Bon Bon sat up and swallowed through a painfully dry throat. “Oh, Carrie. I made a mistake. A big one.”

“Never mind that. Lie down. Redheart’s on the way.”

“I don’t need a nurse.” She could hear the beating of her heart in her ears. It was the rhythm of the orchestra from the train station. “I need Lyra.”

“You stay here. I’ll get her.” Carrot Top looked around the dispersing crowd of ponies. “Where is she?”

“Manhattan. Oh, Carrie, I... I think I broke up with her.” Bon Bon felt fresh tears flow, but these were a gentle release rather than an explosion. “We had a musical number, well, the start of one, except I hurt her, and then I gave all my bits away, and she wouldn’t come home.”

Shock spread across Carrot Top’s muzzle by degrees. “Oh, Bonnie...” she whispered, then set her jaw and held out a hoof. “Let’s go. I just heard the train pull in. If we hurry we can catch it.”

Bon Bon simply nodded; there were neither adequate words for her gratitude nor time to find them. She hoisted herself to her hooves, took a few tentative steps, and galloped, Carrot Top keeping pace alongside.

Their hooves were a drumbeat, the background conversations of the ponies that they passed a harmony. Violins sprung to life deep in Bon Bon’s mind, a rapid, sharp melody giving urgency to their run. She felt her body settling in to the rhythm, the fire of exertion lighting in her lungs and spreading through her, crackling and hissing like a far-distant thunderstorm. A chorus of phantom voices sprang up to join the instruments, swelling into a grand chord seeking its final note. Out of the corner of her eye, amid the disinterested ponies strolling by, Bon Bon saw Nurse Redheart glance at them, do a double take, and raise a hoof. Then they were past her, whipping around a corner, hooves digging in as they leaned into the turn.

“Where is she staying?” Carrot Top shouted over the thunder of their motion. “Does she have relatives there?”

“We were paying for a hotel in Sun Square,” Bon Bon shouted back.

Run, run, the voices in her head whispered, urgent and discordant.

“When did you leave?”

“Yesterday at lunch.”

“I just can’t believe it. You two are such—” They rounded another corner. “*Watch out!*”

Bon Bon’s head snapped back toward Carrot Top, who was staring past her open-mouthed—and then the world upended, with a dull *smack* and a masculine yelp. The world lurched and tumbled around her in a chaotic tangle of limbs, battering her breath from her lungs as it spun to a halt. The voices in her head scattered like bowling pins.

A low moan from underneath her brought her mind back into focus. Bon Bon lifted her head, woozy, and looked down into a grey muzzle topped by a shock of dun-red hair.

“I’m sorry!” she said. “I’m so sorry. I’ve got to catch a train. I—”

She stopped, glancing off to the side. A pair of spectacles sat twisted and cracked a hoof’s length away. She got her hooves underneath her and turned to look back. Lyra was staring open-mouthed at her. Carrot Top was staring open-mouthed at Lyra.

The silence was pristine. Exquisite.

Bon Bon rolled off the busker and struggled to her hooves, not daring to take her eyes off Lyra, not daring to blink.

Lyra’s eyes filled with tears. She smiled. “Hi. Um. I figured it out.”

“Wait,” Bon Bon blurted out, her vision blurring. She limped forward. “You were right. All of it. I don’t care. I just want one more chance—”

“Bon Bon. I love you. *I*. Love you.”

Bon Bon reached forward with a hoof. It met Lyra’s in midair. “Lyra,” she said, “I love you.”

She leaned forward, closing her eyes. Lyra’s lips were soft and smooth, cool in the spring air, yielding to warmth as they both pressed inward.

Lyra was the first to pull back. Her hoof against Bon Bon's was trembling. "Encore," she said, "play the song."

"Lyra?" Bon Bon asked, heart pounding.

The busker chuckled. "Miss Lyra, look around you. Ponyville's all musicaled out, it is. If that kiss didn't bring every pony in the county running, I doubt the princess herself could start a number right now."

Lyra breathed out a wry almost-laugh. "Doesn't that figure. I'll have to owe you one, sweetie."

"It's alright, honey." Bon Bon smiled. It really was. "I have what I wanted. I don't need my musical any more."

"But you shouldn't have to give up musicals for me. I have a problem. Help me fix it."

"You were right, though. Musicals are dangerous. Let's leave them to the ponies with destinies."

"... I think we have a lot to talk about."

Bon Bon nuzzled her. "We do. But everything is going to be fine."

A low rumble built up. Every hair in Bon Bon's body stood on end. She looked around, startled, as the sky lit up and an unearthly shriek blasted at them with almost physical force. A beam of light lanced from the library into the heavens, too bright to look at, casting shadows in the midday sun.

In the deafening silence that followed, every bird in the city took to the air. The sound echoed back at them from the nearby hills. Dogs barked. Foals wailed.

Five ponies dashed out of the library—Twilight Sparkle's best friends—ornate jewelry glowing and smoking around their necks. "Sweet mother of stars," Rarity shouted, "she's *gone!*"

Bon Bon's heart sank. "Leaving?"

Lyra hesitated.

"Leaving," Carrot Top and the busker chorused.

Lyra smiled, looking into Bon Bon's eyes. "We *could* use a vacation."

Bon Bon laughed. "I hear Canterlot's nice this time of year."